

60 years and beyond:

Preparing Malaysia-Republic of Korea relations for a new era

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**Korea-Malaysia
1960-2020**



Excellencies,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Good morning and thank you for joining us today.

I am pleased to welcome you to the Malaysia Scholars on Korea (MASK) Network event on “60 years and beyond: Preparing Malaysia-Republic of Korea relations for a new era”.

As some of you might be aware, this is the fourth event held by the MASK Network since its establishment three years ago (December 2017), pursuant to the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding between ISIS Malaysia and the Embassy of the Republic of Korea in Malaysia in 2016.

True today as back then, the MASK Network continues to act as a focal point for scholars and researchers in the two respective countries to converse, cooperate and collaborate across various disciplines such as, international relations, security, strategy, economics, language, and sustainability, among others. Through the years, MASK Network events have explored the intricacies of a Malaysia-ROK Comprehensive Strategic Partnership; the outcomes of President Moon Jae-in’s visit to Malaysia; and possibilities for ASEAN to further its engagement in the Korean Peninsula peace process.

On top of that, the Network has provided policy perspectives to visiting delegations from Korea, and galvanises members to contribute in forums organised by the MASK Network and ISIS Malaysia, and those that are not.

Through it all, we are very happy to have had **19** members of the MASK Network to share this journey with us, and we thank them for their continued commitment to this network. Building on that, we are also deeply pleased to welcome **six** new members to the MASK Network — and I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude for their enthusiasm towards deepening Malaysia-Korea relations.

In saying that, it would be remiss if I did not mention the support that we have enjoyed from the Embassy of the Republic of Korea in Malaysia, for whom without, these efforts and initiatives would not have come to fruitions.

60 years of relations between Malaysia and Republic of Korea: From acquaintances to fast friends

Dear colleagues,

Politically, Malaysia-South Korea diplomatic relations were forged on February 23, 1960 to a background of the state of Emergency in then-Malaya and in the aftermath of the Korean War. Both countries were then depicted as ‘backwaters’ by Dato’ Santhananaban, a former Malaysian diplomatic officer, but the successes of both nations since then has far superseded expectations of the 1950s international community.

Relations between Malaysia and Korea grew at a steady pace. Early trade relations were characterised by exchanges in raw materials such as logs, crude natural rubber, tin and palm oil exported from Malaysia to a protectionist South Korea who made exceptions for natural resources. As such, some historians say that there is the thread of Malaysia in building the industrialised South Korea today. Despite the shared history of de-colonisation and communism, relations did not grow until the leadership of Tun Abdul Razak, Tun Hussein Onn and Tun Dr Mahathir, whose favourable policies provided the foundations for relations to prosper.

There are four factors that built the foundations and shaped relations we see today. The first is stability on the Korean Peninsula that has provided enough security for South Korea to deepen its engagements with the international community beyond its four largest partnerships. The second is the Look East Policy by Tun Dr Mahathir that sought to emulate and engage Japan and

Korea. The third is the *Hallyu*, or “Korean Wave”, that strengthened people-to-people connections between South Korea and different parts of the world, inclusive of Malaysia. The fourth, would be the persistent and earnest engagement under the New Southern Policy that has oriented South Korea’s views towards Southeast Asia, and has benefited not only Malaysia, but other Southeast Asian neighbours such as Vietnam and Indonesia as well.

Throughout the six decades of relations, the Malaysia-South Korea partnership have materialised in physical structures that are synonymous with Malaysia and Malaysians such as the Petronas Twin Towers, and perhaps to a lesser extent, the Federal Highway. South Korea’s Borneo connection which began with a few South Korean companies in Miri exporting logs from Sabah to South Korea has grown to efforts of building the Smart City of Kota Kinabalu. Projected plans of the Smart City aims to alleviate and mitigate pressing issues such as illegal settlements¹ and transportation problems, in addition to the introduction of a VR centre in Kota Kinabalu.

Dear colleagues,

It is clear that the past six decades has established a deep foundation for Malaysia-South Korea relations, and the question before all of us today is how do we prepare this relationship—built on sound economic foundations, and closer people-to-people relations—for the future?

Areas for future cooperation that we have explored in the past includes building on Malaysia’s strong foundation in halal products and services, halal tourism, education and finance and South Korea’s potentials in electronics and information and communications technology. These are also in existence with present untapped potentials such as the ties of South Koreans who have completed their primary or secondary education in Malaysia, who can serve as beacons of connectivity.

At the end of last year, there were conversations of a Strategic Partnership that would elevate ties. This would be a hallmark and timely for both South Korea and Malaysia to navigate future challenges.

Besides that, while I am sure the esteemed panellists that we have invited will have more than a few thoughts on the matter, I want to take this opportunity to highlight one specific area ... for Korea to assist Malaysia in developing our capacity to become an aid donor.

¹ The mention of South Korea’s partnership to address illegal settlements was stated here: <https://smartcity.go.kr/en/2020/04/19/%EA%B5%AD%ED%86%A0%EB%B6%80-%ED%95%9C%EA%B5%AD%ED%98%95-%EC%8A%A4%EB%A7%88%ED%8A%B8%EC%8B%9C%ED%8B%B0-%EA%B5%AD%EC%A0%9C%EA%B3%B5%EB%AA%A8-12%EA%B1%B4-%EC%84%A0%EC%A0%95/>

I say this today with admiration for what South Korea has managed to achieve in the short span of six decades. As some of you will know, official development assistance, or ODA, was the only source of capital for South Korea following the devastation of the Korean War in the early 1950s. Five decades later, South Korea ended its dependence on the World Bank's assistance (1995) and was excluded from the OECD's list of ODA recipients in 2000. In 2010, three years shy from six decades after the armistice effectively ending the Korean War was signed — South Korea became the 24th member of the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC).

Naturally, this inspires us here in Malaysia and we aspire for the same moving forward, either through reinvigorating our existing Malaysian Technical Cooperation Programme (MTCP)² or in another form. This, for Malaysia to be more active as an international donor, holds a dear place to me and I hope that it inspires imagination from some of you too.

Towards building relations to not last for another 60 years, but also to further the development story of both nations, hinges on the need for pragmatic and consistent relations. These are the areas that would be explored in the two sessions held today, and , and I invite panellists, participants and observers to engage and discuss these issues, for us to forge another 60 years of success.

Thank you.

² First initiated at the First Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Sydney in February 1978. See <http://www.matrade.gov.my/en/about-matrade/achievements/matrade-success-stories/malaysian-technical-cooperation-programme-mtcp>